Remembering Jordanelle

by Jon Beatty Fish

I was raised in Heber. My adolescent years of the early '60s were spent in and around Wasatch and Summit Counties. What is known as the Jordanelle started out being a small cafe, motel, and "beer parlor" in the '50s — or even before. Eventually, it became the area bordered south by the old Heber Light and Power substation north of Heber City, to the Keetley Mines turnoff on the north, to the Old Hermit's house across the street a few hundred yards to the west, and up to Lemon's Dugway to the east.

Even in the early part of the '60s, a Jordanelle Dam was talked about as part of the Central Utah Project. I guess I was too busy being a teenager to give its reality much thought. Now, the area known as the Jordanelle will be covered almost completely with water. At the old gravel pit going to Kamas, Phil Badger and I discussed the fact that soon this would all be under water and we would not be able to trap shoot anymore.

Several years later, as a small Beechcraft set down on an emergency landing, we also watched it sitting on the highway and remarked, "He'll need water skiing gear next time."

One of the standing jokes with my grandparents, whenever they traveled to Salt Lake, was that Grandma "would be asleep before we get to the Jordanelle." It was also the waking up place on the return trips from Wyoming and Salt Lake County.

Remembering Jordanelle brings a gush of memories equalled only by what the spillway will one day spew forth. The old Wasatch Stake farm was just north of the Jordanelle. We boys were required to go out in the spring and remove rocks before the hay crop was planted. At the first cutting in late June or early July, and again at the second cutting in late August, the boys of the stake were required to turn the bale's wire up so that the men could grab them easier and throw them on the wagons. Eventually, I became big and strong enough to do the stacking of the bales on the wagons which were driven across the road to barns and sheds at Hailstone Junction.

The huge wooden pipeline that ran along the eastern foothills near the Jordanelle was a magnificent engineering piece in that country. In the winter, when the leaks would freeze over, that old pipeline would become something of a winter sculpture. Each year it was distinctive and different. People from the city drove up to the Jordanelle area to see the ice formations that looked like animals, clouds, and even people. In the spring and fall the deer were always down on the Provo River for water in early evening or dawn hours. The fishing near the bridge at Jordanelle was always excellent.

While in high school, a young boy from town climbed up from the river and suddenly fell in front of my uncle's car at the bridge. That was a tragedy that struck down all of Heber. It caused severe trauma within our family and my heart was heavy for weeks.

At about that same time, a Kamas girl and a Heber boy were killed in an automobile accident near Lemon's. I was at a dance at the old Social Hall when word arrived of that gruesome accident. We were all stunned at the loss of friends and peers. The twisting highway of darkened night had taken its toll.

Near the mid-point of the decade, the owner of the Jordanelle complex built the Sugar Shack for the kids of the county. You could go there and sip soda, dance, and play the pinball machines. We hung out there while the fad lasted. It was wholesome entertainment and somewhere different than the school, the Crown Cafe, or Scrappy's. It was also an introduction to Fruit Stripe gum and Fresca — billed as a diet drink of grapefruit and carbonated water. It was also a middle ground meeting place for the competitions of South Summit and Wasatch High School boys an girls, who normally had to sneak in and out of town to date "the other school kids." That was Judy Crystal and me. Her allegiance to the green and white of SSHS and me with the gold and black of WHS. Those were difficult times for kids 16 and 17 years old.

During the heavy conflict years in Vietnam of the mid-60s, some patriotic person painted an American flag on the black stone cliffs across the road, to the east, from the Jordanelle. It was believed that the same person or group put the large American flag high on the cliffs of Provo Canyon, opposite the Sundance turnoff. It was a welcome sight to me, personally, as my selective service number got higher and higher as I approached high school graduation. It also made me feel better about the bumper stickers that were being circulated that read, "When will we win in Vietnam, and why not?" I was too young to know.

No one wanted to go to Vietnam. One of my classmates, Blaine Welch, went. He came home in a pine box to Heber Valley, draped in an American flag. He passed the painted one at Jordanelle on the way into town for his burial.

Maybe the Old Hermit, Sam Laurie, was the most unique part of the area. Sam was related to the Baums in Heber. Harris Parcell, who managed the Main Street Safeway, seemed to take a personal interest in the man. I never met Sam personally, but I saw him out cutting wood dozens of times and we wrote about him in our literature and English classes on numerous occasions. He was the subject of photography classes, art classes, and every other subject that had a need to discover something different or unusual. "Old Sam" had the typical long beard of gray and he dressed different than we kids in our Adlers, paisley, and madras materials.

My part-time job after school in those days was pumping gas at the Texaco station on the north end of town. Its owner, Bob Morris, had a small piece of ground near the Jordanelle that he grass-hayed and kept a horse on. Every now and again, I would take the old Jeep pickup out to throw a bale of hay or check on the animal.

I understand the importance of water and its need for a growing population. I am not a radical who thinks the dam should not go in. On the contrary, people and their survival is always of greatest import, but the memories that are going to be covered at the Jordanelle are as vivid and clear today as they were 25 years ago. When they were happening.

My home now in in northern California. The state and federal governments are trying to drain a large dam here that is comparable in area to the Yosemite Valley. The water that is being stored there is the drinking water for San Francisco. You can imagine that there is quite an argument going on about the dam and water behind it. I wish someone would come forward and share their memories of that valley, from long ago.

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